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AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED TO

MARRIED WOMEN,

BY A SQUIRE'S WIFE.

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PREFACE.

MANY friends having pressed me to publish the following little Address on the ground of its probable usefulness, I have consented though with some reluctance to do so; but wish emphatically to describe it, not as a tract to give away to the poor, but as a suggestion to be acted on in various ways as circumstances may suggest, by ladies in my own or a similar position.

Its history is this: I had long been distressed at the utter want of any adequate sense of the shame and guilt of the sin of unchastity among the girls in country parishes; and was especially grieved at an occurrence in my own village which seemed unusually sad and inexcusable, and which would have been impossible had a healthy tone of opinion existed on the subject. But I had been unable to see any way of applying a remedy, from the extreme difficulty of discussing or even broaching the subject; until it occurred to me that if I could nerve myself to the effort, a spoken address would have the best chance of making an impression.

Having consulted the wife of the Rector of the parish, who heartily responded to the idea, and was the greatest help to me throughout, I sent to every married woman in the parish the following written circular :—

“Mrs. —— particularly requests Mrs. —— to meet her at the school to-morrow, at 6.30, for the purpose of hearing an Address.”

When the time came and they were all assembled, the lamp was so placed that the light should fall on the MSS. only, leaving the room otherwise in darkness. I had not proceeded far before the sound of sobs told me that my words were not being wasted or misunderstood. I ended, as I began, with two or three short prayers; the women all dispersed silently, and the meeting was over.

In my subsequent visits to the village, I found nothing but grateful thanks and earnest promises of amendment and of increased care for their children on the part of the mothers; and all to whom I spoke, whether my words were applicable to them or not, were unanimous in assuring me that I had taken the very best way to attain the result I hoped for, and that they fully appreciated the painfulness of the effort I had just made.

I will only add that I have since adopted the system of sending with all girls who leave my village for their first place, a circular letter to their future mistress, begging her to do what may lie in her power to help the girl to keep herself respectable.

V. A. W.

ADDRESS.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,

I must begin by telling you that I have thought long and anxiously before I called this Meeting, and that nothing but the most solemn conviction that it was my duty to try at least to be a help to you in any way that I could, has induced me to do it. I had rather have spoken to each one of you in private, and have told you thus what was in my heart; but I found that I could not do so, for reasons which some of you will soon guess.

And I want you, above all, to believe this, which I tell you from the bottom of my heart, that I am not come here to lecture or to preach to you, for that is certainly neither my vocation nor my business. But I want to talk to you, the married women of this parish, on a subject about which no man—not even your Clergyman—could speak out

plainly to you. You will know what I mean—the subject of Christian Purity.

Now I know well what some of you will think to yourselves as you hear this. You will think, it is all very well for Mrs. W—— to talk about this, or to wish things bettered ; but she does not know what the difficulties are of those who lead hard-working lives, and have but small cottages, many of them, to live in. *She* can bring up her children out of sight and sound of temptation and evil of every kind ; but we cannot, it is of no use trying—the girls must just take their chance.

My Friends, I have two answers to this. One is, that *because* I feel God has in His goodness given me the means of shielding my little daughter from all knowledge of evil which all here have not, *therefore* I am earnestly anxious to help as I may the mothers of this parish to bring up their little girls pure in heart, pure in word, and pure in deed.

The other answer is, that in large towns it is well known that there is far more carefulness on these subjects (in spite of destitution and overcrowding of which we in the country have no idea) than there is in rural districts. Also in Ireland,

in some parts of which the most miserable poverty prevails, and where people live in mud hovels shared with animals, the girls are almost always as pure and virtuous as the daughters of the rich could be. In London, if a girl misbehaves she is said to have "lost her character;" she is shunned by relations and friends, and often falls into the most dreadful misery in consequence. The fear of this of course acts in a very wholesome manner, and often keeps a thoughtless girl from sin. Among the Irish, it is well known that the girls, however poor they may be, always keep their characters above reproach; at least it is the rarest thing possible for an Irish girl to misconduct herself.

Now therefore, I will tell you why I have asked you all, without exception, to meet me here; it is to implore you, in the name of our Blessed Saviour, Whom we all profess to love and serve, to do what lies in each of you, to keep the girls of this village now growing up, pure and virtuous, and not to let me hear any longer that dreadful saying that since I have lived here has made my heart sore:—"It does not so much matter, so long as I am married before my baby is born." It does matter, it does matter! Every woman who has ever said that or

thought that, feels it in the depths of her heart till the end of her life. She is no longer the same ; she can never respect herself, or feel that her husband respects her, as if she had kept herself as a Christian girl should keep herself until the day of her marriage. She may be a good wife, a devoted mother, but there is something wanting ; whenever she opens her Bible she sees with an inward pang, that the fault of which she was once guilty is there spoken of as severely as any sin can be ; she sees that for these things' sake "the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience," (Col. iii. 5.) And she feels, "Oh, if I had only been helped ! if my mother had only taught me that this sin was the worst that a woman can commit, that I should be utterly disgraced if I did this ; and, still worse, that I should dishonour my Christian profession, and offer a deliberate offence to the sinless purity of Him who died to save me, if I even thought of such a thing, how much happier I should be now, and how much easier I should find it to bring up *my* girls in that holiness without which no man or woman either shall see the Lord !" Oh, my friends ! will you not promise me to try and save the girls of this village, and all those over

whom you have influence, from the chance of ever feeling this sad self-reproach? Will you not all do this in your several positions, those to whom my words could not apply, as well as those to whom they may?

You will observe that I say nothing about men or boys; I speak as a woman only, and to women; and I say solemnly, that when we respect ourselves, whatever our position in life, men will respect us. Teach your daughters, I beg you, and help others to teach theirs, that no man will take liberties with a girl who really cares for her honour. Let a mother only bring up her girl in the belief that modesty and carefulness of conduct are the very first things she has to think of, and that loss of virtue is the worst thing that can happen to her, and we shall soon hear no more of "misfortunes," as they are called. And to those especially who already set a bright example among you I would say, let it be seen plainly with what horror and loathing you regard the sin of impurity; for if you pass it over lightly you actually encourage it. This is compatible with the utmost love and charity to the sinner; God forbid that I should wish you to judge harshly of any one.

All this time you will see that I have been supposing that a girl has only anticipated her marriage, and that afterwards her lover has been faithful to her and married her. But how if he is not faithful; and, having been taught by the girl herself to think lightly of her, goes away and leaves her, perhaps with a fatherless child? She has only reaped what she has sown; no woman has any right to count on a man's honour who has not shown him she considers her own the most precious thing she has; given to her by her Father in Heaven to keep like a priceless jewel, against the day when she will be called to praise Him with the holy angels, who, pure as they are, nevertheless veil their faces before Him, the God of purity. Or what if the man dies suddenly, without having had time to marry her, or what if she dies with this wilful sin on her soul, perhaps unrepented of? My dear friends, to count on an after-marriage to make things right, as it is called, is to tempt God in the most presumptuous manner: it does not undo one atom of the past, nor can it avert the displeasure of God. It is too late for any of us to destroy the past; we cannot call back the days that are gone, but the future is before us still,

thank God! We can all work together, whatever our station may be, towards the blessed end which I have set before you; and we may rest assured that if we will only try our best, and determine to do His will, God will help us, and make our labours successful.

I must remind you once more that I am only speaking to you as one woman may speak to another, on a subject about which a woman can speak to women better than a man could do, and that I know well that except for the mercy of God in surrounding me with loving care and good example in my own girlhood, I might have been no better than those of whom I have been speaking. This is why I felt I must speak to you; I could keep silence no longer without injury to my own conscience; and I pray God with my whole heart, that in His mercy He may sow the good seed in all our hearts and cause it to grow and bring forth fruit.

Think how much good we might do if it came to be said that in this village you might be sure that a girl was "steady," as it is called. "Ah, she comes from N——, then we can trust her; *she'll* not let the lads run after her or get into trouble," people would say; but this happy result, which

we might hope would soon spread elsewhere—for it is wonderful what example will do—can only be attained by all of us setting this object steadily before us, and determining that from this time forward we will do our very utmost to keep the girls of this parish from evil.

Those among us who are mothers, or who have the charge of young girls, must remember that watchfulness is most necessary. When a girl goes wrong it is often far more the fault of her mother than her own. She has probably been allowed in her school days to run about the streets of an evening, hearing and seeing mischief of all kinds, and, when older, has been allowed to receive her sweetheart alone at hours which are most unseemly; or her dishonour has been openly winked at, and held to be nothing wrong at all, as it was “under promise of marriage.”

I daresay, some of you have thought that the rules observed on this and other estates, about married sons and daughters not being allowed to live with their parents when there was not proper room for them, and lodgers being forbidden without special permission, sometimes pressed hardly on you; now you will perhaps see that the object of all these

regulations is the same as my object in addressing you to-night. The rules are intended to be a help in preserving decency and virtue, and I feel sure that in future you will take advantage of them, and see their necessity.

Remember (I am now speaking more especially to those who live in small cottages) that you should all take the utmost care to teach your children decent and modest habits. You can do this much more than you think, if you will only try. Things which seem to you mere trifles may do harm to a child, and teach it bad habits, or take away its innocent ignorance. I beg you, dear friends, to take especial care about your sleeping rooms. As far as you possibly can do it, let none but very little boys and girls sleep in the same room, or at least without a partition, or good screen. Do not say you cannot take care of these things; you can if you like, and at least you can do your best. When there's a will there's a way.

And you can take special care not to let your cottages be overfull at the feast-time, when I fear much mischief goes on. Why, I have seen bedrooms shockingly crowded above, and a parlour below shut up and seldom used—just kept for foolish

show—in which the boys could perfectly well sleep.

Keep your boys and girls at home of an evening as much as possible after dark ; you could do this much more than you do.

And don't let sweethearting go on at night except in your presence. When you go to bed yourselves, see that the young man leaves the house. In these respects there ought not, and there need not, be the least difference between the richest and the poorest.

When a young man begins to keep company, and even when he has promised marriage, let him understand, if you like, that he is a welcome visitor at fitting hours, but *nothing* more.

I cannot say it too strongly, this sin is just as offensive in God's sight, just as wrong, just as shameful if committed with a prospect of marriage as without. And more : it is a deliberate mockery of our sacred and holy marriage service, to treat it as nothing but the means of giving a legal name to a child about to be born.

My dear Friends, what it has cost me to say all this to you, you have perhaps little idea. I have been accustomed never to speak, nay, not even to

think, of these miserable and shameful subjects ; nothing but a strength not my own could have carried me through my painful task ; but so much has happened since I came here to force this crying evil on my attention, that I felt that if I shrank from doing what I could, whatever the cost might be, I should be held responsible before God for a distinct failure of duty.

If what I have said should prove of any use ; if by the grace of God's Holy Spirit any of you should be led to think seriously on these subjects, and to try and make a beginning of better things, and help others to do the same, then I shall thank Him and wish for no other reward ; I shall be able to feel that we are indeed trying to purify ourselves even as He is pure ; that whatever others may do, we are trying to do His will ; and I shall feel that the words I have spoken, which have been so hard to say before you all, have drawn us all closer together, and enabled us to feel that we all have a common interest in the holiness of this place, and in the promotion of God's glory.



